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## **THE USES OF POETRY: RENEWING AN EDUCATIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF A LANGUAGE ART**

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Drawing on research undertaken for a project that explored the cultural value of poetry in lifelong learning, we argue for the renewal of a specifically educational understanding of poetry as a language art. In a context of increasingly instrumental approaches to the uses of poetry in educational settings, late twentieth century discussions and perspectives on the relationship between poetry (as a distinct language art and distinctive mode of language use), experience and learning are examined in order to argue for the importance of poetry *as poetry* in education. Differences between poetry and other language arts such as literary prose and rhetoric are explored in an attempt to seek conceptual clarity about poetry as a mode of language use. The work of British educationist James Britton, in particular, is seen as important in this regard and his synthesis of intellectual resources from philosophy, psychology and literary studies. We conclude by arguing that the distinctiveness of poetry and the essence of its utility in education arises from its self-conscious effort to draw attention to its symbolic nature and that poetry *as poetry* therefore meets a deeply human need to symbolize.

Despite the importance of poetry as part of our cultural heritage, there have been surprisingly few attempts to articulate its cultural value in today's society, particularly in relation to how such cultural value should inform educational policy.<sup>1</sup> Such a lack of clarity of the importance of poetry filters through to how poetry is taught in schools and universities; the cultural value of poetry therefore gives way to the increasing emphasis on providing instrumental justification for the teaching curriculum. For instance, including poetry in the curriculum is often justified in terms of promoting transferable skills and knowledge such as problem-solving, understanding and interpreting language, general creativity, widening vocabulary, identifying or 'spotting'

techniques and learning historical facts – all of which are of value but are not necessarily tied to the particular mode of language use that might be defined as poetry. In other words, such knowledge and skills might be obtained by other means; they are not tied to the specific utility of poetic language. With such increased emphasis on the instrumental value of poetry (where the emphasis is on the ends not the means, and therefore, where little attention is paid to the aesthetics of the work), we are concerned that in educational settings, at least, we are missing the importance of poetry *as poetry* and the rich aesthetic experience it affords. In thinking about such issues, we embarked on an investigation into the features, value and benefits of the particular mode of language use known as poetry, as part of a larger project focused on the ‘Uses of Poetry’ [anonymised for review], which was concerned with identifying the benefits of reading poetry as part of life-long learning. Our claim is that there is a use-value of poetry (that connects to the richness of poetic language in speech more generally), which is tied to the aesthetics of such texts. Furthermore, we are arguing that such value can only be properly cultivated through an attention to poetry *as poetry*, in other words, by taking seriously its aesthetic value rather than treating it as a simple means to some end.

Poetry, of course, continues to figure in educational interactions in schools and universities. In England, where our project is based, the government’s own school inspectors have noted a trend over the last eight years where, while substantially more poetry is taught for public examinations, the meaning of the texts *as poetry* is increasingly lost. In commenting on one lesson

observed and deemed to be paradigmatic of the problem, inspectors noted ‘no exploration of ideas or language ... the text could have been a railway timetable.’<sup>2</sup> The conclusion of the same senior inspector was that the problem is that ‘national tests and examinations have too much impact’ to the extent that meaning and personal, social, aesthetic and political value are being evacuated from poetry; poetry, in effect, has been appropriated by the testing and accountability cultures that are endemic in many public (i.e. state) schools in many countries.

In this article, we are arguing for a renewal of the properly educational understanding of poetry that, historically, has been developed by educationists through thoughtful engagements with philosophy, psychology and literary theory. The specifically educational value of poetry – its utility in formal educational settings such as schools – is lost when it becomes a tool of a testing regime or a deliverer of transferable skills because of a lack of attention to the aesthetic experience the text gives rise to. The consequences of such a loss, as educationalist James Britton noted,<sup>3</sup> are wider than the individual child but more broadly social and cultural, contributing to the marginalisation of a distinctive language art that meets a deeply human need. Reading, writing and experiencing poetry as part of an education is not just a ‘nice thing to do’ but an essential part of the process by which we all recreate symbolic patterns of meaning in our culture. Poetic language is all around us in some minimal but significant form, and so we need to gain awareness of the power of such language and its value by working through exemplary uses of poetic language, i.e. in poetry, where we have a

heightened sense of the aesthetics of language and what function this can perform, and how this mode of language use can meet our needs.

There is a long-standing debate about whether poetry *as poetry* can play an important part in our cognitive, emotional and moral development and therefore hold an important place in our learning through the life-course. We can trace this idea back to Plato's (4<sup>th</sup> Century BC) concerns about the status of poets in ancient Greek society, despite also appearing to argue that poetry can have an important educational function in his ideal state.<sup>4</sup> In Book X of the Republic, Plato expresses deep scepticism about the perceived beneficial function of poetry at the time, warning of its corrupting influence because, he argued, the poets could only offer a mere imitation of reality in their poetry and therefore lead us further from truth. Plato's apparent contempt for poetry was later challenged by Horace in his *Ars Poetica* (1<sup>st</sup> Century BC), where he argues that poetry can perform an educational function. Such a positive view of poetry can also be seen in the work of Sir Philip Sidney (1595), who argued that poetry has great moral value because it contains 'virtue breeding delightfulness', which provides moral instruction as well as offering pleasure.<sup>5</sup> Later, Shelley (1840) argued that poetry has particular cognitive value: poetry 'awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought'.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Shelley argued that poetry is important as part of our moral development: 'Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb'.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, poetry *as poetry* has a use value: 'Whatever strengthens and purifies the affections, enlarges the

imagination, and adds spirit to sense, is useful'.<sup>8</sup> In 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935-6), Heidegger outlines his view of poetry as something which is able to reveal truth through what he calls 'projective saying', a form of language which offers the potential for the disclosure of truth by bringing forth that which is ordinarily hidden.<sup>9</sup> More recently, Dylan Thomas (1954) proclaimed that 'A good poem helps to change the shape and significance of the universe, helps to extend everyone's knowledge of himself and the world around him.'<sup>10</sup> Adrienne Rich articulated a political purpose for poetry in arguing that it 'breaks silences for, or at best, with the silenced'.<sup>11</sup>

Yet despite such calls from these influential voices to give poetry *as poetry* an important place in society because of its power to enhance our emotional, social, and moral selves or through revealing truth, such importance has failed to translate into educational policy.

### **Defining 'Poetry'**

One of the issues with giving poetry such place in society and culture is the lack of definition; we may say that poetry is valuable in such ways, yet we need to have some way of identifying what it is we are talking about and what it is about such texts that give them such value. In making the case for the 'Uses of Poetry' and its educational as well as its broader cultural value, as elsewhere, it is important to have (at the least) a working definition of what we mean by poetry, which is able to illuminate why certain texts have such utility as works of poetry and is able to connect poetry as an artform to poetic uses of language, which, is prevalent in the everyday. In this article, we attempt to move towards such an understanding of poetry that can reveal the

features of particular kinds of language use that give rise to perceived beneficial effects, educational and otherwise. We are not trying to provide a definition that necessarily captures our cultural conception of poetry. Instead, we are attempting to mark out a mode of language use, which may or may not neatly map onto what we think of as poetry from a cultural point of view. Once we are closer to identifying the features of poetry and poetic language, we are closer to being able to say what value it has and how it is of benefit in education.

In striving for such an articulation of the uses of poetry, we will survey a number of definitions of poetry as a way of developing our own working understanding of a particular mode of language use, one which connects those exemplary uses of poetic language found in poetry with ordinary uses of 'poetic' language in order to demonstrate the importance of attending to such language use. As the interest is in a mode of language that has particular benefits or affordances, such a definition may end up being more restrictive than the common understanding of poetry. This is not necessarily a weakness but aims to pick out those particular poetic (and therefore aesthetic) features of language that give rise to certain benefits for the reader in order to answer the question of why such language use is important and why we need to return to focus on the aesthetics of such texts in education. Therefore, such a definition may evolve as we gain greater understanding of how we respond to poetry and poetic discourse. Also, we would like to leave any definition open enough to include the poetic as an aspect of many kinds of language use rather than only in written texts formally defined as poetry. In order to achieve our

aim, we examine a number of previous attempts at definitions and explanations of the broadly educational uses of poetry. In particular, we focus on the work of philosophers and educationalists in the mid- to late-twentieth century, leading specifically to that of James Britton at the University of London Institute of Education, those who influenced him and those he, in turn, influenced. In this way, our efforts may be described as an attempt to reclaim or, perhaps more appropriately, *renew* a definition of poetry along with an explanation of its utility in education.

One of the challenges in seeking conceptual clarity in understanding poetry is to distinguish it from related but distinct forms of writing and language arts. For instance, we want to distinguish poetry from literary prose in order to show what attending to poetry can offer. However, both poetry and prose are similar in that they share a ‘twofoldness’ of meaning, i.e. we can understand the work at both subject level and thematic level. Peter Lamarque writes that in understanding a literary work at the subject level, we are concerned with grasping the events, characters and objects portrayed in the work. In understanding a literary work at the thematic level, we are concerned with ‘identifying a perspective or vision or general reflection that informs the subject matter and moves beyond the immediate events portrayed’.<sup>12</sup> We can just as easily say what a poem is about in these two ways as we can a work of literary prose. The two forms also share certain features of language such as use of metaphor and rich vivid language, which evokes the imagination. For example, the novel *Perfume: the story of a murderer* provides as rich an imaginative experience for the reader, which evokes strong sensory images,



particularly of the smells of Paris, as is often associated with the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. Nonetheless, in this article, we focus specifically on poetry as a distinct language art – a distinctive (we will argue) mode of language use that shows up to some extent in ordinary use of language but also a curricular formation.

### **Resisting definition: ‘Poetry is whatever you think it is’?**

There appears to be little consensus across disciplines as to what we should mean by poetry; a definition appears to be elusive. Instead, there is reliance on straightforward paradigmatic cases of poetry, which are recognized as part of the canon of literature. This is in large part due to the diversity of kinds of poems (e.g. epic, lyric, haiku, sonnet) and poetic uses of language that we want to include in the category of poetry (from a cultural point of view).

However, there have been a number of attempts to define poetry, such as Wordsworth’s definition of poetry being ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ to distinguish it from mere plain prose.<sup>13</sup> More recently, philosopher Anna C. Ribeiro has attempted to produce a (cross-cultural) definition, emphasizing one key aspect of poetry – repetition. For Ribeiro, repetition encompasses both the repetition of meaning, sound and structure. But her definition also makes reference to a historical-institutional theory of art (see Levinson),<sup>14</sup> one which specifies that a work counts as a work of art provided it bears the right kind of relation to the history of that art form, whether that’s by adopting or rejecting previous uses of repetition devices. She writes:

A poem is either (1) a verbal object relationally or intrinsically intended to belong in the poetic tradition, by following, transforming, or rejecting the repetition techniques that have characterized that tradition (non-naive poetry-making), or (2) a verbal art object intrinsically intended to involve use of repetition schemes (naive poetry-making).<sup>15</sup>

This definition may help us to begin formulating what we mean by poetry, but such a definition is inadequate for our purpose here; these features may turn out to be important in identifying those texts that count maximally as poetry, however, we want to focus our attention on what people do with such works, not necessarily what the poet was doing in making the work (although this may inform the reader's engagement with the work to some extent). Such focus on the reader is important in order to articulate how poetry and the poetic mode of language can play an important role in our lives, in other words, what it enables readers to do and the educational benefits this provides. Alternatively, we can look to a functional definition, such as that suggested by Monroe Beardsley. He writes that 'an artwork is either an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character or (incidentally) an arrangement belonging to a class or type of arrangements that is typically intended to have this capacity'.<sup>16</sup> Such a functional definition of poetry has been put forward by Robert Pierce, which focuses on what we do and can do with a poem: poetry is 'the kind of text that rewards the techniques of poetic analysis (as specified in a list of what readers

and critics actually do)'.<sup>17</sup> This definition refocuses our attention away from features of the poem as a work (or 'object') to the activity of poetic analysis. We should, therefore, look to features of this kind of analysis in categorising those works which supports such analysis; this may involve specifying some features of the text but only with reference to what this allows people to do with the text. Of course, this still leaves open the task of detailing the necessary and sufficient conditions for rewarding poetic analysis; as it stands, it is a somewhat circular definition. The important point here is that in such functional definitions there is a connection between poetry as an art form and a poetic mode of language use, whether the emphasis is on the affective, formal features, cultural role or relationship with the reader, thereby inviting poetic analysis by the reader to a greater or lesser extent.

However, there is still much work needed in order to say how readers do or ought to receive such works. In fact, as readers, we may wish for a broader or narrower conception of what poetry is, particularly with reference to the *uses* of poetry, which places the reader (as opposed to the writer or critic) at the heart of what we want to capture. Therefore, a further dimension to the definition is required that captures how we are to engage with works. The criteria for poetry are placed in terms of what we can do with a work, not necessarily in terms of features the work itself has. In other words, we can see this as an attempt to categorize poetry in terms of the mode of language utilised and the mode of reading such a mode of language promotes, rather than as a set of properties that we can find in the text on the page or that govern its creation.

### *The affordances of poetry*

One perspective that has been informing our discussion so far in this article is derived from ecological psychology and the work of James Gibson, who places emphasis on the interaction of human subjects with the artefacts they create.<sup>18</sup> Gibson used the word ‘affordances’ to suggest that the meaning-making potential of any artefact arises in the interaction between human subject and that artefact. This idea is useful to us because we are trying to understand the relation between the reader and text, in particular, how the reader engages with the text and the nature of the meaning-making activity involved.

Affordances are a matter of perception. Both ‘perception’ and ‘interaction’ are important in this account of meaning-making in that artefacts are not held to have intrinsic, universal or transcendent meanings that can be uniformly decoded. The artefact itself is a product of a specific cultural system that has evolved historically (which chimes with Ribeiro’s definition of poetry); the artefact is also perceived by an individual who, in turn, is embedded in a particular sociocultural context, at a particular point in time (which relates to our interest in poetry as connected to readers).

Such a view of meaning-making allows for the affordances of the particular artefact to change within the lifecycle of the individual perceiver as well as over longer historical cycles. Understanding particular kinds of texts as having certain affordances (or as having greater affordances than other kinds of texts)

allows us to make some categorisations that are based on their potential for certain kinds of meaning-making (the uses of poetry) rather than based on a text's correspondence to any list of formal features or generic characteristics.

We can relate this to philosopher John Gibson's account of how we experience poetry, which shows that the potential for certain kinds of meaning-making in poetry is complex:

In common cases: (i) poetic meaning is experienced as *latent*, that is, there is frequently and importantly a felt gap between understanding the language of a poem and understanding the poem itself; and (ii) we experience poems as having a *twofoldness of communicative content*, that is, as speaking and so producing meaning on two distinct levels.<sup>19</sup>

By twofoldness of communicative content, Gibson means 'the meaning of the lines that constitute the poem and the meaning of the poem itself'<sup>20</sup>, which we can think as an analogue of the twofoldness of the meaning of a poem: its subject and themes (which is the kind of twofoldness identified by Lamarque in all works of literature, as discussed earlier). On one level, a reader can be thought to have understood the poem by having understood the meaning of the words and the sentences they form, which is therefore limited in the meaning-making potential for the reader. But that isn't all that we mean by understanding the poem. We also need to think about how the words are working together as part of a complex whole (i.e. how the words are being used) and how those words affect us (how we experience the unfolding

poem). The connections between words go beyond those made in sentence formation, which are supported by the patterning of sound and meaning. The felt 'gap' is important, since this is where we can dwell in possibilities – the gaps gives rise to the work's affordances. From this we can start to see how the use of language in exemplary or paradigmatic works of poetry offers a heightened and more complex twofoldness of communicative content than can be found in ordinary language use.

To highlight both the difference and similarity between exemplary uses of poetic language and more ordinary use, we will now compare a short, relatively unknown poem (which has the advantage of allowing the reader to experience first-hand what such an experience of poetic language offers) and a brief quotation from Donald Rumsfeld.

The following haiku by Chris Jones (from his sequence 'At the End of the Road, a River') illustrates this twofoldness of communicative content, in particular how the aesthetic experience of the text moves us towards a 'felt gap', which is important in allowing a sense of possibility and a sense of the hidden to be revealed in its resistance to being reduced to a singular meaning:<sup>21</sup>

Your purling black heart  
gives up petals from street lights  
one silver lily

In order to understand this poem, we need to understand the individual units of meaning, such as ‘purling black heart’ (i.e. we need to have the corresponding concepts of ‘purl’, ‘black’ and ‘heart’) and appreciate this in relation to the river Don in Sheffield, England (the subject of the sequence). But we also need to understand the poem as a complex whole, that is, its content in that form. The poem clearly demonstrates the kind of latent meaning John Gibson points to; it’s not clear what a ‘purling black heart’ is in relation to a river – the meaning is gestured towards but we cannot fully grasp it, we must think of possibilities of how to make sense of this and decide what to take into account in forming our interpretation of the poem, guided and sustained by our affective engagement with the poem.

In reading and experiencing the poem, we make various connections across the poem, which allows us to grasp the poem as a complex whole. For instance, the units of meaning are tied together by the relationship between colours – the ‘black’ of the ‘heart’ and the ‘silver’ of the ‘lily’, which helps us to imagine the beauty of the reflection of the street lights on the river. Without making certain kinds of connections across the poem, it seems difficult to make sense of ‘one silver lily’, what this means and what it is expressing (there appear to be a number of possibilities). The role of this line is not to describe a flower on the river but acts to express a contrast between light and dark, and to appreciate the beauty of the juxtaposition of city and nature. The fact that it is a haiku is significant in appreciating this poem as ultimately concerning nature and reflecting seasonal change, shifting our attention to seeing the city as part of our natural world. Therefore, we can see this text as

inviting us to do something with it, to make various connections (within the work and beyond it), inviting us to have certain kinds of responses and to think of possibilities of meaning, yet resists being reduced to any one meaning.

In thinking about this example, it's useful to consider S.K. Langer's comments on the connection between emotion and the experience of reading poetry. She writes:

A poem always creates the symbol of a feeling, not by recalling objects which would elicit the feeling itself, but by weaving a pattern of words – words charged with meaning, and coloured by literary associations – akin to the dynamic pattern of the feeling (the word 'feeling' here covers more than a 'state'; for feeling is a process, and may have not only successive phases, but several simultaneous developments; it is complex and its articulations are elusive).<sup>22</sup>

The poem appears to be structured around such a patterning of feeling. The words are presented as interwoven, which engages us in a particular way; it encourages us to think of associations and how it makes us, as readers, feel, which is the mechanism by which we come to understand the poem without being in a position to fully articulate what it means, the poem therefore enables an opening of possibility of meaning.



When we talk of paradigmatic poetic writing, what we are often interested in is what Lamarque calls sustained use of ‘the formal marks of poetry – metre, rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, metaphor, imagery and compressed language’.<sup>23</sup> Where the formal marks of poetry are present, a further distinction must be made. We must distinguish between cases where they are not necessary to the work or have no intrinsic value to the work: ‘[there] are cases where it seems entirely possible – in some contexts desirable – to ignore the surface poetic form altogether and focus on the ideas and arguments in their own right’.<sup>24</sup>

Poetic form is considered inessential where the reader’s consideration of form in interpreting and understanding the work does not enhance their sense of coherence and consistency in a significant way; we are still able to grasp clearly the content of the poem without considering the form at all. What is of interest, in Lamarque’s words, ‘are cases where thought and form are more closely integrated, where the poetry is, as we might say, essential not incidental’.<sup>25</sup> And it is where the poetic experience itself has communicative value where it is able to express something beyond the literal meaning of the words; its meaning is expressed indirectly, not directly (such as through propositions).

It is a kind of meaning-making that involves engaging with the precise form of the text; we must respond to the formal features in relation to the representational content of the poem. Angela Leighton put it this way:

Philosophical language is transitive, disclosing a ‘something’ which other philosophers can take and argue with, in their own words. The matter remains the same. Poetical language, however, is intransitive; it withdraws its content into its form, thus leaving, as it were, the poem without any removable residue of sense.<sup>26</sup>

For Leighton, the encounter with a poem is a mode of discovering rather than discovery; it is something that is ongoing rather than final. It is the fact that the poem says what it does in this precise way that enables the affordances of the poem and facilitates a kind of thinking and reflection for the reader by offering up this open space for meaning-making.

It is important to note that such an approach to categorizing poetry is not inevitably a relativistic one. Although there are no absolute rules that would allow for historically unqualified determination of a text as poetry, the perception and evaluation of that text by language-users would inevitably draw on culturally and historically contingent criteria in the same way that is true of perception in the visual arts. So, words spoken by a US Secretary of State for Defense (Donald Rumsfeld) in a press conference six months after the September 11th attack on New York in 2001 were seen to have some poetic affordances at the time even if their affordances in the longer-term have diminished. We should think of something with limited affordances counting minimally as poetry, and those texts with the greatest affordances, counting maximally as poetry. We don’t regard Rumsfeld as a

poet and the utterance is now seen more as a realistic comment on the limitations of intelligence gathering, but in virtue of having *some*, albeit limited, affordances we can see how an attention to the aesthetics of language use build towards such opening of possibilities that we see in those exemplary cases of poetry:

there are known knowns;

there are things we know we know.

We also know there are known unknowns;

that is to say we know there are some things we do not know.

But there are also unknown unknowns

– the ones we don't know we don't know.

Such a view of the properties, potential or affordances of particular kinds of language-use can also be informed by a more broadly cultural psychology of the kind elaborated by Michael Cole, who is, by training, a cognitive anthropologist of literacy.<sup>27</sup> From this perspective, a poem would be regarded as a cultural artefact of a symbolic kind that is used to mediate the individual perceiver-subject's activity in the social world. Again, the artefact does not have intrinsic meaning in and of itself but becomes the site for meaning-making as the person uses/reads/writes the poem in the process of acting on the world. The object or goal of the subject's activity is a driving factor from this perspective – why is the artefact being used and for what ends? Used for the purposes of stimulating recall of food items during a visit to the supermarket, a poem is probably not as useful as a short list. But a poem

would probably hit the spot more effectively if directed at a lover on Valentine's Day than a short list of the lover's notable features. Again, the affordances of the text are related to the ways in which that text is perceived and used. The cultural psychological perspective also helps to understand the relationship between individual perception and the more public phenomenon of meaning-making – the semiotic heritage that enables individuals in similar cultural-historical contexts to share meanings. Seeing a poem as a mediating (between the person and an aspect of the world they seek to work on) artefact rather than an exhibit in the canon of literature is a profoundly different understanding of the uses of poetry in any setting whether educational, therapeutic or literary. None of which is to say that meaning is determined by the single interaction of perceiver and artefact but that the affordances for meaning-making evolve historically as the perceiver-subject develops and as the collective, social evaluation of the artefact-in-use develops too.

One of the essential features of a poem *as poetry* is sometimes said to be that it resists paraphrase.<sup>28</sup> This resistance is because we want it to do this mediating between us and the world – if it could be paraphrased, it would suggest that what poetry provides is something finite, something concrete. But what we are getting at here is that poetry is something that is active, reflective and open-ended, something that can be shaped in the mediation rather than only shaping the experience of the reader.

The upshot of such a view of poetry is that it appears to rule out the Rumsfeld quotation as counting *maximally* as poetry because the formal features do not

appear to be intrinsic to the meaning-making the poem affords (i.e. it could be paraphrased); it does not seem to provide us with the right kind of textual space that can support the active, reflective thinking process that Leighton has in mind. Furthermore, without engaging us in active thinking (as opposed to final thought), it seems it cannot be providing the mediation between person and world that we have outlined above in our discussion of the poem as a mediating cultural artifact in the social world.

Jones' poem resists paraphrase in the sense that it is metaphorical and imagistic, whereas Rumsfeld's quotation is built up of an interrelation of concepts. However, we should still view the Rumsfeld quotation as counting *minimally* as poetry since although we may be able to paraphrase this quotation to some degree, such a paraphrase would lose the affordances of the original text because it wouldn't open up those possibilities of how to understand the relationship between the concepts of known and unknown as facilitated by the repetition of those sounds that link these concepts together.

### **Patterning and symbol: Poetry as a mode of language use**

Although we might say that anything that is recognized as poetry (on the basis of its meaning-making potential) is probably poetry, it is also worthwhile to try to account for differences in the language of texts recognized as poetry from language in other types of texts that usually are not. To address this question, we argue that the work of Britton is significant because his approach

offers us a good model for making the case for the specifically educational value of poetry.

James Britton worked at the University of London, Institute of Education and then Goldsmiths' College until the early 1980s. He was writing about poetry and the teaching of poetry from as early as the 1950s but his later work became informed by various empirical projects (such as the study of the development of children's writing abilities) as well as by long-standing philosophical interests (Langer, Polanyi, Rorty, etc.) and by the arrival, in 1962, of the first English translation of Russian psychologist Vygotsky's *Thought and Language*.<sup>29</sup> Vygotsky offered Britton a theory of mind itself derived from the empirical study of human development as well as the study of philosophy and literature. Vygotsky was also to influence the work of Cole and his form of cultural psychology mentioned earlier. But Britton's interests and resources were wider and more eclectic while at the same time being interested in improving educational practice.

The first distinction Britton made was between literary and non-literary discourse and in doing so, he drew on linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson and semiotician Thomas Sebeok. From Jakobson, Britton drew the different functions of language in speech situations and writing: expressive (or emotive); referential; poetic; phatic; metalingual; conative (related to action). The poetic function in this taxonomy was equivalent to 'verbal arts' and Britton followed Jakobson in insisting that one could only talk about or categorize on the basis of 'dominant function'; all utterances and texts are

informed by and characterized by structures from other functions. From Sebeok in particular, Britton took the position that the poetic function of language went wider than that deemed to be poetry:

Any attempt to reduce the sphere of poetic function to poetry or to confine poetry to poetic function would be a delusive oversimplification. Poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function, whereas in all other verbal activities it acts as a subsidiary, accessory constituent (Sebeok;<sup>30</sup> cited in Britton<sup>31</sup>).

*How can we understand the 'poetic function' of language?*

One of Britton's earliest distinctions was between language in the spectator role and language in the participant role.<sup>32</sup> Participant role was characterized by language intended to recount or describe an event or past experience in order to get the listener/reader to do something or to change their opinion. Spectator role was characterized by language intended purely to interest or excite the listener/reader, re-presenting events or past experiences in language for their own sake. Britton argued that spectator role was not only confined to self-consciously literary discourse but also featured in non-literary discourse such as anecdote. At the time of making this distinction, Britton cited Langer's work on symbolization but he later found (retrospective) support in the work of British psychologist D.W. Harding<sup>33</sup> who had already

distinguished between the onlooker role and the participant role. Harding prompted Britton to consider the role of attention and evaluation in the listener/reader's perception of language-in-use.

Britton related the spectator role to the findings of the empirical study he made of children's writing. Examination of the writing samples produced three main categories: *transactional* (getting things done, in the participant role); *expressive* (articulation of emotion and first-hand experience, where the participant and spectator roles are mixed); and *poetic* (where, to use his formulation, we are 'making something with language rather than doing something with it'; it was poetic discourse that met the demands of the spectator role).

The intention of making something with language suggested to Britton that the use of language would become more 'organised', more crafted to be complex (at a symbolic level) and it was from this interest in the organization of language that he came to the stylistics of Henry Widdowson.<sup>34</sup> Widdowson identified three organizational patterns at work in texts that set out to be literary: phonological (e.g. metre and rhyme); syntactic (e.g. parallel structures); and 'patterns formed by semantic links between individual lexical items' (e.g. puns). Britton, after Widdowson, suggested that the patterning created in self-consciously poetic language use (patterning of sound, syntax and meaning) went 'over and above' the everyday pattern of communication. Use of the systems of patterning drew attention to the language as a kind of invitation to take up the spectator role. Britton suggested (perhaps playfully)



that poetry could therefore be considered ‘deviant discourse’ in that it drew attention, stylistically, to how it differs from non-literary discourse. Its deviancy, for Britton, was that poetry draws attention to how it works as communication and ‘drawing-attention-to-itself’ was a characteristic of language in the poetic mode.

Again, Britton comes back to Langer<sup>35</sup> and her distinction between discursive and presentational symbolism, between a ‘message encoded in a symbol system’ and a ‘message encoded in a unique complex symbol’ to illustrate the different ways in which language is used in the poetic function, the ‘deviant’ display of the symbol system as symbol; the self-conscious patterning to draw attention to its difference from everyday discourse as well as encoding meaning.

### *Patterning and meaning*

The relationship between organizational patterning in language and the meaning-making affordances of a text can be illustrated by the quotation from Donald Rumsfeld’s press conference provided above. In the original transcript on the US Department of Defense website, the utterance is presented in continuous prose; a lengthy and somewhat tortuous answer to a journalist’s question. In making the quotation, we selected a stretch of the utterance and then edited it by changing the layout – creating separate lines and varying the length of lines in order to emphasise the three assertions (known knowns; known unknowns; and unknown unknowns) and the repetition of key words to create assonance and consonance and some sense of internal rhyme. As we

did so, we also recalled, probably unconsciously at first, our own readings of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, in particular, and its ethos of existential questioning. Overall, the aim was to focus attention on the use of language – to invite the reader to take up the spectator role. Our attempt was self-conscious and related to our aim of helping to contribute to our argument in this article.

But as poetry, the Rumsfeld quotation probably has limited affordances. Not only is it still strongly tied to another context and another mode of language use (press conferences, political justification), it also makes quite a limited and instrumental distinction between categories of knowledge, albeit in a repetitive way. The short stretch of Rumsfeld's utterance doesn't have much potential for meaning-making outside of a very specific set of circumstances. To use Langer's formulation, it is a message encoded in a symbol system but it is not encoded as a unique complex symbol. None of which is to say that it is not poetic at all; like many utterances it has characteristics of the poetic function but we would argue that the poetic function does not dominate.

There are many examples of the poetic function in everyday utterances wider than poetry *per se*. Football songs and some stand-up comedy use language characteristic of the poetic function. Carol Fox,<sup>36</sup> in her landmark study of young children's oral storytelling, argued that the poetic (metaphoric) was a major part of their language right from the start and, in doing so, she argued with Halliday<sup>37</sup> who did not assign much importance to the poetic function in the process of developing adult language. Fox's study raises the very

important question as to why children seem to have such a strong need for the poetic from the very beginning, at the inception of language itself. Her argument, somewhat similar to Langer's, was that the poetic function, rather than being the icing on the cake, *is* the cake. The poetic function of language meets the deeply human need to symbolize.

### **Renewing an educational understanding of poetry: Concluding comments**

The perspectives discussed here can help us develop a complex understanding of the potential uses of poetry in educational settings, although they are clearly not the whole story. These perspectives can help us to make the important distinction between poetry regarded as a work in relation to other works (such as that offered by Ribeiro) – where the focus is on the particular features of poetry as distinct from other art forms – and poetry as something that is experienced by a reader (such as that offered by Pierce, (John) Gibson, and Langer) – where the focus is on the particular features of experience that such works give rise to. Furthermore, what they can help us to capture are the uses of speech and writing regarded as poetic; (James) Gibson's, Cole's and Britton's work encourages us to move away from an understanding of the poetic as a transcendental category of language and they can liberate us (if we need liberating) from a view of poetry as a cultural judgment passed down from on high. Instead, they can help us focus on the potential or the affordances of a text for meaning-making and on the relationship between meaning-making and the self-conscious organizational patterning of language. At the heart of this relationship is the role the reader/listener is invited to take

up in perceiving and apprehending the poem as a cultural artefact – the spectator role. The deviance of poetic discourse derives from its self-conscious drawing-attention-to-itself in the course of communicating. The poetic function of language is ubiquitous in human communication but the category of language-use we describe as poetry is defined by its self-conscious effort to draw attention (through sound, syntax and patterns of meaning) to its symbolic nature.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We are not denying that there have been important contributions to making the case for the importance and value of poetry. Some notable examples include Condillac's *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (1746), where he charts the important role poetry has played in cultural memory, transmitting laws and religious beliefs; Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935-6), where he makes the connection between poetry as an artform and the value of poetic language, which is perhaps closest to the view of poetry we will develop here; also, Emerson makes an argument for the role of poetry in society in his essay 'The Poet' (1844), particularly in virtue of the poets ability to symbolize. See also Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), and Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989) for further examples.

<sup>2</sup> Ofsted (2012) *Moving English Forward: Action to raise standards in English*, London: Ofsted, p. 15. See also Ofsted (2007) *Poetry in Schools. A survey of practice*, London: Ofsted.

<sup>3</sup> Britton, J. (1958/1982) 'Reading and Writing Poetry', *Prospect and Retrospect: Selected Essays of James Britton*, edited by Gordon M. Pradl, London: Heinemann Educational Books.

<sup>4</sup> For Plato's critique of poetry, see his *Republic*, *Gorgias*, *Ion* and *Phaedrus*. However, in the context of Plato's works more broadly, it is unclear what his stance is towards poetry, even within the *Ion* Plato appears both critical of poetry yet connects the poet with the divine. Furthermore, such ambivalence is deepened when we consider the fact that Plato appears to adopt a poetic form in his own writing (and some, most notably Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, go as far as to argue that he is a poet himself), yet on the other hand (when we consider the content aside from its form), he appears to argue against its corruptive powers as steering us away from truth and reality.

<sup>5</sup> Sidney, P. 'An Apology for Poetry'. In *An Apology for Poetry / Sidney. A Defence of Poetry / Shelley*, edited with introduction and notes by H.A. Needham, London: Ginn, 61.

<sup>6</sup> Shelley, P.B. 'A Defence of Poetry'. In *An Apology for Poetry / Sidney. A Defence of Poetry / Shelley*, edited with introduction and notes by H.A.

Needham, (London: Ginn, 1932), 78. This view is echoed by I.A. Richards (1926) *Principles of Literary Criticism* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), London: Routledge Kegan Paul.

<sup>7</sup>Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', 79.

<sup>8</sup>Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', 97.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, M. (2002) 'The Origin of Work of Art', in *Off The Beaten Track*, edited and translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge: Cambridge University press, pp. 44-47.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas, D. (1954) 'On Poetry', in his *Quite Early One Morning*, London: Dent, p. 169.

<sup>11</sup> Rich, Adrienne (2007) *Poetry and Commitment*, New York: W.W. Norton, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Lamarque, P. (2009) *The Philosophy of Literature*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 150.

<sup>13</sup> Wordsworth, W. (1802) 'Preface' to the Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems, London: T.N. Longman and O. Rees.

<sup>14</sup> Levinson, J. (1979), 'Defining art historically', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (3): 21-33.

<sup>15</sup> Ribeiro, A. C. (2007), 'Intending to repeat: A definition of poetry', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2):189–201. P. 193

<sup>16</sup> Beardsley, M. (1982) *The Aesthetic Point of View*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, p. 229

<sup>17</sup> Pierce, R. B. (2003), 'Defining "poetry"', *Philosophy and Literature* 27 (1): 151-163. P. 160

<sup>18</sup> Gibson, J.J. (1966) *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin

<sup>19</sup> Gibson, J. (2011), 'The Question of Poetic Meaning', *Nonsite* 4, <http://nonsite.org/article/the-question-of-poetic-meaning>, accessed 13 November 2012

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. (no pagination)

<sup>21</sup> Jones, C. (2005) *At the End of the Road, A River*, [http://www.chris-jones.org.uk/don\\_poems/](http://www.chris-jones.org.uk/don_poems/), accessed 14 March 2014

<sup>22</sup> Langer, S. K. (1953), *Feeling and Form*, New York: Charles Scribner's sons, p. 230.

<sup>23</sup> Lamarque, P. (2009), 'Poetry and Abstract Thought', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (1), 37

<sup>24</sup> Lamarque, P. (2009), 'Poetry and Abstract Thought', 37-8

<sup>25</sup> Lamarque, 'Poetry and Abstract Thought', 38

<sup>26</sup> Leighton, A. (2009), 'About About: On Poetry and Paraphrase', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (1):167-176

<sup>27</sup> Cole, M. (1996) *Cultural Psychology: the Once and Future Discipline*, Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press.

<sup>28</sup> Brooks, C. (1968) 'The Heresey of Paraphrase', in *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London : Methuen); see also P. Lamarque (2009) 'The Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning', *Ratio* 22: 398-420.

<sup>29</sup> Vygotsky, L.S. (1962) *Thought and Language*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

<sup>30</sup> Sebeok, T. (1960) *Style in Language*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press



<sup>31</sup> Britton, J.N. (1982), 'Spectator role and the beginnings of writing'. In *Prospect and Retrospect: Selected Essays of James Britton*, edited by G.M. Pradl, London: Heineman, p 62

<sup>32</sup> Britton, J.N. (1963) *The Arts and Current Tendencies in Education*, London: Evans, p 65

<sup>33</sup> Harding, D.W. (1937), 'The Role of the Onlooker', *Scrutiny* 6: 247-258.

<sup>34</sup> Widdowson, H.G. (1975) *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature*, London: Longman

<sup>35</sup> Langer, S.K. (1967) *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, Baltimore, Md: The Johns Hopkins University Press

<sup>36</sup> Fox, C. (1993) *At the Very Edge of the Forest: The Influence of Literature on Storytelling by Children*, London: Cassell

<sup>37</sup> Halliday, M.A.K. (1973) *Explorations in the Functions of Language*, London: Edward Arnold